United Nations A/73/458

General Assembly

Distr.: General
26 October 2018

Original: English

Seventy-third session
Agenda item 139
Pattern of conferences

Pattern of conferences

Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions

I. Introduction

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/73/93). In addition, the Committee had before it the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2018 (A/73/32), which includes the text of a draft resolution on the pattern of conferences in annex I. During its consideration of the report, the Committee met with representatives of the Secretary-General, who provided additional information and clarification, concluding with written responses received on 17 October 2018.

2. The report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 72/19 and other relevant mandates and contains information on matters relating to meetings management and documents management in 2017, together with cost-efficiency initiatives and cross-cutting issues. **The Committee notes that resources are not requested in connection with the report and there are no immediate financial implications resulting from the report.**

II. Conference management strategy

3. In paragraph 5 of his report, the Secretary-General indicates that a harmonized conference management strategy has been achieved by means of the mandated delineation of responsibilities among the four duty stations and that a working group has been established to review the key performance indicators of conference management operations. Upon request, the Advisory Committee was provided with information relating to the agreed delineation of policy and operational responsibilities in conference services among the Under-Secretary-General of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and the Directors-General of the offices away from Headquarters as well as other accountable officials.

18-17957 (E) 301018

Please recycle

The Committee trusts that the information relating to the agreed delineation of responsibilities regarding conference management across the four duty stations will be provided to the General Assembly at the time of its consideration of the report of the Secretary-General. The Committee welcomes the harmonized conference management strategy and looks forward to receiving more detailed information regarding future delineations in the delegation of authority and the assessment of individual capacities in conference management.

III. Meetings and documents management

Innovations in meetings and documents management

4. In his report, the Secretary-General provides information relating to a number of innovations in meetings management (A/73/93, paras. 22–29) and documents management (ibid, paras. 47–51). Upon request, the Advisory Committee was provided with a comprehensive list of pilot projects currently under way in the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and notes that the Department is currently working on an extensive number of innovations and pilot initiatives. **The Committee welcomes the initiatives of the Department and notes that the majority of the projects have been developed and implemented utilizing in-house capacity and expertise. The Committee trusts that information relating to the pilot projects will be provided to the Assembly at the time of its consideration of the report of the Secretary-General.**

Remote interpretation

5. The Secretary-General indicates that the increased use of remote meeting participation and videoconferencing tools (where participants are not in the meeting room) has posed new challenges for the interpretation services and guidelines on technical requirements and standards for remote participation and videoconferencing were therefore prepared in early 2018 and shared with intergovernmental bodies and relevant units of the Secretariat in New York. He also indicates, in paragraph 28 of his report, that the practical and technical feasibility of remote interpretation (where the interpreters are not in the meeting room) between the four duty stations has been assessed, resulting in recommendations that included setting up a dedicated room at each duty station to test distance interpretation. The Advisory Committee notes that the concept of remote interpretation could present a number of challenges for interpreters, resulting in a potential impact on quality. The Committee was informed that a previous pilot project had been halted by the General Assembly and that remote interpretation was not currently being utilized by any international organization. **The Committee trusts that the Secretary-General will provide additional justification for the proposed pilot project for the consideration of the Assembly.**

Documents processing

6. With respect to the cost parameters for the production of a United Nations document and for interpretation into the six official languages, the Advisory Committee was provided, upon request, with detailed information on such costs in 2018, including for meeting services (see annex).

Nairobi conference centre

7. In paragraphs 10 to 12 of his report, the Secretary-General provides details regarding the deteriorating condition of the Nairobi conference centre and the limited capacity to provide conference services. He indicates that the conditions of the centre are severely hampering the utilization of meeting services and that the utilization rate

of the facilities declined to 39 per cent in 2017. He indicates further that the current conditions of the conference centre pose an immediate risk to the servicing of the main calendar events to be hosted in Nairobi. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that, given the interdependence of equipment, furniture and overall conference infrastructure, any significant upgrades and replacements would require holistic planning among building, information technology and conference management teams. As a result, dedicated resources would need to be provided to cover the maintenance costs.

8. The Advisory Committee was also provided with additional information regarding the status of the conference facility, the urgency of the conditions and the need for an upgrade of the centre, as identified by the Secretary-General in his report on the strategic capital review (A/70/697). **The Committee recommends that the General Assembly take note of the concerns of the Secretary-General and the information provided regarding the condition of the conference centre at the United Nations Office at Nairobi. The Committee recommends that the Assembly request the Secretary-General to submit a proposal for addressing the matter expeditiously.**

Conference facilities at the Economic Commission for Africa

9. In paragraph 18 of his report, the Secretary-General provides information on the utilization and improvement of the conference facilities at the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). He indicates that the percentage of available conference resources used in 2017 remained high, at 90 per cent, and that facilities will be improved with the installation of redesigned accessible podiums and adjustable lecterns in conference rooms 1 and 2 in 2019. He also indicates that premises must be renovated regularly and that, since Addis Ababa is expanding rapidly, urgent technological improvements are needed to ensure that the Commission maintains its ability to provide cutting-edge conference services. He also states that a capital investment plan to facilitate digital technology upgrades at the conference centre during the period 2018–2022 has been finalized and that the Africa Hall renovation project is due to be completed in 2021. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the technologies and endowment of Africa Hall were not adequate to guarantee conference management functionalities and that a complete replacement of all installations, including conference management, audiovisual and broadcasting technologies, was foreseen for the renovation project. The Committee notes the condition of the conference facilities at ECA and provides further observations and recommendations on this issue in its report on progress made in the renovation of Africa Hall and the construction of new office facilities at ECA in Addis Ababa.

Non-calendar meetings

10. In paragraph 30 of his report, the Secretary-General indicates that requests for the use of United Nations premises for non-calendar meetings and side events have continued to increase in New York, Geneva and Vienna. With regard to the increases in non-calendar meetings in New York the Advisory Committee was informed that non-calendar meetings and events in 2017 accounted for 73 per cent of total meetings, compared with 56 per cent in 2012 (see table 1). In his report, the Secretary-General indicates that the additional work generated has strained the meetings management services in New York in 2017.

Table 1
Number of calendar and non-calendar meetings, 2012–2017

	2012	*2013*	*2014*	*2015*	*2016*	*2017*
Non-calendar meetings	5 192	5 209	7 294	10 000	9 863	9 789
Calendar meetings	4 091	4 493	4 600	5 168	5 107	3 687
Total meetings	9 283	9 702	11 894	15 168	14 880	13 476
Percentage non-calendar/ calendar meetings	56/44	54/46	61/39	66/34	66/34	73/27

11. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the increase in non-calendar meetings was attributable to the increasing number of requests from Member States for the use of United Nations conference rooms and the General Assembly Hall for events that did not form part of the official functions of the Organization. These included, but were not limited to, model United Nations conferences, discussions and dialogues, concerts and film screenings, special events, side events, informal briefings, meetings of groups of Member States, and meetings and events sponsored by Permanent or Observer Missions to the United Nations.

12. The Advisory Committee was also informed that an essential principle of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was the recognition of civil society as a key stakeholder in the implementation, follow-up and review of the Sustainable Development Goals. Each year, approximately 7,000 representatives of non-governmental organizations participate in intergovernmental events at the United Nations in New York. Because non-governmental organizations have become more active at the international level and more directly engaged in intergovernmental processes, the number of side events related to mandated meetings has increased exponentially in the past three bienniums. In terms of the range of entities requesting non-calendar meetings, the Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that a request might be made by an intergovernmental or expert body, a Secretariat entity, a regional group, a Member State, an agency, fund or programme of the United Nations system or any other entity for which no budgetary provision existed under section 2, General Assembly and Economic and Social Council affairs and conference management, of the programme budget.

13. The Secretary-General indicates in paragraph 30 of his report that a study is being conducted in New York on the establishment of a mechanism whereby cultural activities, meetings and events not related to the intergovernmental process are charged for the associated costs. He indicates that a cost-charging mechanism similar to that used in the United Nations Office at Geneva is being reviewed and that the administrative instruction dated 26 April 1996 on the use of United Nations premises for meetings, conferences, special events and exhibits (ST/AI/416) will also be revised to reflect the launch of the one-stop-shop solution for requesters of meeting services. He further indicates, in paragraph 29 of the report, that a tool to automatically determine the resource and financial implications of conference services, technical and support services of meetings and special events, based on the requirements specified by the user, was developed at the United Nations Office at Geneva in 2017.

14. In terms of the mechanism applied in Geneva that forms the basis of the New York study, the Advisory Committee was informed that cost reimbursement was sought for services not covered by the programme budget. The Committee was further informed that the United Nations Office at Geneva used the Umoja service delivery module to calculate the cost for meetings and special events and to charge clients for extrabudgetary meetings. In addition, an extrabudgetary calculator tool had been

launched on a pilot basis for the Office of Disarmament Affairs in September 2018 to simplify the financial planning process for extrabudgetary meetings and events by generating financial scenarios with cost implications for clients.

15. **The Advisory Committee notes the significant increase in non-calendar meetings and events in New York in the past five years and the increasing requests made of the Secretariat, and of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management in particular. The Committee looks forward to the results of the study being conducted in New York regarding a cost reimbursement mechanism for cultural activities, meetings and events not related to the intergovernmental process.**

III. Staffing

16. In paragraphs 52 to 62 of his report, the Secretary-General describes a number of measures introduced in 2017 regarding recruitment and replenishment of the rosters for language posts. These include remote recruitment testing, expanded outreach to potential recruits, training of potential recruits through internships and traineeships, implementation of the diamond-shaped staffing structure, utilization of electronic workflows and optimization of capacity use. **The Advisory Committee acknowledges the efforts made by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to address the staffing challenges of the Department.**

17. In table 2 of his report, the Secretary-General indicates that the vacancy rates for text processing in New York and Geneva as at 31 December 2017 were 14 per cent and 19 per cent, respectively. **The Advisory Committee recalls the staffing challenges faced by the Department in text processing and trusts that the restructuring will lead to a reduction in the vacancy rate.** The Secretary-General also indicates that the vacancy rates in Nairobi were 37 per cent for interpretation, 14 per cent for translation and 14 per cent for text processing. The Committee notes the continuing vacancies in the interpretation services in Nairobi and encourages the United Nations Office at Nairobi to make further outreach efforts to educational institutions in the Pan-African Masters Consortium in Interpretation and Translation, African universities teaching interpretation and translation and other relevant institutions in order to increase applications from qualified applicants and reduce vacancy levels.

Remote testing

18. In paragraphs 55 and 56 of his report, the Secretary-General indicates that recruitment testing was conducted in 2017 and that, of the six language competitive examinations held, three were combined examinations for translators, editors, verbatim reporters and copy preparers, proofreaders and production editors. The testing resulted in the rostering of 143 language professionals for recruitment in 2018. All of the combined examinations in 2017 were conducted remotely and were accessible electronically to any qualified applicant with a computer and Internet connection, including persons with physical disabilities. The Secretary-General indicates that the number of applicants increased from 3,203 to 6,739, and that the proportion of applicants from traditionally underrepresented regions rose from 20 to 33 per cent in the English examination and from 25 to 47 per cent in the French examination. The Advisory Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that, with respect to the three combined competitive examinations conducted remotely, the number of applicants per vacant post was estimated at approximately 67 applicants per post projected to become vacant in the next three years. **The Committee welcomes the use of remote testing as a recruitment tool and looks forward to receiving a**

further update on this initiative in the context of the next report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences.

Temporary assistance for meetings

19. In paragraph 54 of his report, the Secretary-General indicates that temporary assistance for meetings is used to retain qualified freelance language professionals to handle surges in workload and to cover temporary in-house capacity shortfalls. He also indicates that, as a result of a number of factors, the Secretariat has reduced its expenditures on temporary assistance across the four duty stations for in-house translation, interpretation and verbatim reporting by $1.8 million (11 per cent), $2.4 million (19.5 per cent) and $70,000 (2.6 per cent), respectively, recording an overall decrease of $4.21 million (13.6 per cent) between 2016 and 2017. Upon request, the Advisory Committee was provided with information relating to the expenditures on temporary assistance across the four duty stations (see table 2). The Committee was informed that fluctuations from year to year reflected the close linkage between the utilization of temporary assistance and the scheduling of major conferences, as well as fluctuations in the programme budget implications in any given year.

Table 2
Expenditures on temporary assistance across the four duty stations
(United States dollars)

	2013	*2014*	*2015*	*2016*	*2017*
Translation					
New York	3 322 816	3 585 183	3 220 872	5 662 325	5 462 365
Geneva	5 895 400	7 386 500	7 680 500	9 089 522	7 232 236
Nairobi	393 918	57 093	232 834	37 870	57 460
Vienna	1 055 134	970 500	1 046 356	1 211 090	1 496 922
Interpretation					
New York	3 071 221	4 317 061	5 723 140	5 181 190	3 521 437
Geneva	1 849 400	2 388 400	2 456 600	3 964 394	2 997 975
Nairobi	1 853 308	2 170 625	1 218 886	1 603 125	1 518 728
Vienna	1 386 180	1 563 107	1 736 348	1 497 529	1 818 991
Verbatim reporting					
New York	1 654 337	1 919 654	2 308 001	2 676 027	2 606 154

IV. Facilities and accessibility

20. In paragraphs 63 to 66 of his report, the Secretary-General provides an overview of activities and initiatives related to the accessibility of persons with disabilities to conference services and facilities. The Secretary-General indicates that the Secretariat sought to ensure greater accessibility of the meetings of direct relevance to persons with disabilities in 2017, such as meetings in New York of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, dedicated meetings of the Human Rights Council, meetings of the States parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and other events. He also indicates that the Interdepartmental Task Force on Accessibility launched a survey soliciting feedback from all users of Headquarters facilities in New York on their accessibility and that the responses are being used to develop a detailed plan for improving accessibility.

21. **The Advisory Committee acknowledges the range of accessibility services in the area of documentation and conference services. Nevertheless, the Committee notes that the concept of accessibility has evolved to the extent that the requirements and ramifications encompass much wider considerations across headquarters locations, offices away from Headquarters and other duty stations, as well as considerations for current and future staff members and Member States. These include, but are not limited to, recognition of the range of disabilities affecting individuals (physical, cognitive or other), access to physical facilities, availability of assistive and accessible technologies, measures to ensure physical and psychological well-being in the workplace, organizational socialization practices, tailored onboarding of new staff members with disabilities, inclusiveness and integration efforts and the provision overall of reasonable accommodation for temporary or permanent conditions. The Committee trusts that the Secretary-General will duly consider the breadth of issues associated with the matter of accessibility and the context in which to report annually and in a comprehensive manner thereon.**

V. Conclusion

22. **Subject to its comments and recommendations in the paragraphs above, the Advisory Committee recommends that the General Assembly take note of the report of the Secretary-General.**

Annex

Cost parameters related to documentation and meeting services in 2018

A. Production of one United Nations document

(United States dollars)

	New York		*Geneva*		*Vienna*		*Nairobi*	
	8,500 words, 26 pages	*10,700 words, 32 pages*	*8,500 words, 26 pages*	*10,700 words, 32 pages*	*8,500 words, 26 pages*	*10,700 words, 32 pages*	*8,500 words, 26 pages*	*10,700 words, 32 pages*
Cost of one document[1]	26 000	32 500	29 100	36 600	26 300	32 900	25 000	31 400

[1] The cost of processing one document includes costs related to translation, revision, text-processing and editing, as well as printing and distribution.

B. Meeting services for up to two days

(United States dollars)

	New York	*Geneva*	*Vienna*	*Nairobi*
Cost of one meeting/day/six official languages[1]	11 900	12 500	12 500	17 900

[1] Total cost for one meeting/day covering the six United Nations official languages.

C. Meeting services for more than two days

(United States dollars)

	New York	*Geneva*	*Vienna*	*Nairobi*
Cost of one meeting/day/six official languages[1]	16 800	17 600	16 700	27 300

[1] Total cost for one meeting/day covering the six United Nations official languages.